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ABSTRACT

Support systems research has expanded its therapeutic horizons beyond the family, often using the concepts and methods of social network analysis. Recent network developments provide useful suggestions for support systems research in the analyses of social ties and social networks, and the implications of large-scale social structure for small-scale support systems. Most support systems studies consider a single social network and define all social ties as supportive, disregarding variations in the content, breadth, symmetry and use of such ties. The network analytic approach employs a differentiated analysis of both ties and networks in support systems research. Much of support systems literature analyzes the network in isolation. There is, thus, a need for the incorporation of power and dependency relations into support systems studies: the implications of large-scale division of labor for the flows of network resources must be considered. (Author/NRB)

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DO NETWORKS SUPPORT?

A Structural Perspective

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September, 1980

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DO NETWORKS SUPPORT? A STRUCTURAL PERSPECTIVE

"Support Systems" and Social Networks

Support systems research has usefully expanded therapeutic horizons beyond the family, often using the concepts and methods of social network analysis. Most support system researchers have based their work on the original, sensitizing -- somewhat metaphoric — concept of "the social network" developed in the 50s and 60s.

My purpose here is to suggest the usefulness to support system research of more recent network analytic developments. Network analysts are now creating a more comprehensive paradigm, emphasizing the pattern of social networks as determining links to scarce resources. They try to describe these structural patterns and to use their descriptions to explain such social processes as "support". Their descriptions are based on the network concept of ties linking nodes in a social system -- where these ties may be between persons, groups, organizations, or clusters of ties.

Much of this work is now coalescing, (see the review papers of Burt, 1980; Wellman, 1980). Network analysts have formed a common group -- the International Network for Social Network Analysis (INSNA). Network developments can provide useful suggestions for support system research in the posing of questions, the organization of data collection, and the use of analytic methods. In this short paper, I will briefly sketch some of this work's implications for three areas of concern to support system researchers:

* the analysis of social ties;
* the analysis of social networks;
* taking into account the implications of large-scale social structure for small-scale support systems.

More Differentiated Analysis of Ties

Do All Ties Support? The inherently supportive nature of ties that is built into the very "support system" label creates both conceptual and empirical difficulties. The conceptual difficulty is that important -- even intimate -- ties are often not supportive. The empirical difficulty is that many researchers do not use "supportive" criteria to define the universe of ties which they are investigating. They, quite properly, ask about kin, friends, "intimates", etc. and assume that such ties are supportive. Yet our work -- and others' -- finds that only a minority of important ties are significantly supportive (cf. Wellman, 1979). Many network members limit their support claims on other people precisely because they anticipate that such claims would destroy the relationship (Wellman, Shulman and Leighton, forthcoming).

We must go beyond "interpersonal attraction" assumptions (e.g. Berscheid and Walster, 1978) -- so common in both psychology and sociology -- that most strong ties are voluntarily chosen. Many ties are not with people one likes or has chosen to be with. They are there, structurally embedded, in work situations, the neighborhood, kinship systems, and friendship circles. The ties may be important patron-client relations, which provide important resources to participants but no affection.

There are other complexities in the nature of ties, besides their supportive content: the symmetry of ties is often implicitly associated with their supportiveness. If I like you, you like me. Yet network studies find few ties resemble the link between Damon and Pythias. Rather, most ties are asymmetric in content and intensity. There is rarely a one-to-one correspondence in exchange. Often, there is not even an overall symmetry.

Using network analytic techniques, we can also go beyond treating ties only bivariately -- present or not present. It is obvious that not all ties are equivalent in content, in structural location, or in the personal resources of members. Some ties are based on affection while others are based on instrumental resources. Some are narrowly specialized while others are more holistic. While some reduction principle is always useful in analysis, too often support system research treats all ties to be equivalently supportive. Yet current network analytic methods can preserve many distinctions between types of ties and use them powerfully to portray systems of social roles.

My final thought on ties foreshadows the next section on networks: we must go beyond the two-person link to take into account indirect ties. Often we value our link to someone else for the links to others to which that person can connect us. Experts at this are called "brokers" or "gatekeepers". We can easily trace and study these indirect connections through matrix multiplication in order to study indirect access to resources.

Networks and "The Social Network"

We need a more differentiated concept of networks as well as of ties. Most support system work talks about "the social network". This assumes, a priori, that there is a unitary, bounded, corporate nature to the set of people with whom an individual is dealing. However, there are conceptual, empirical and ideological problems with this assumption.

We have little empirical evidence to assume that most people are members of such a single, solidary, densely-knit network. Most members of contemporary Western societies appear to be involved with complex network structures, often comprising both densely-knit clusters and more sparsely-knit webs. Their

ties go off into different worlds -- work, neighborhood, kinship -- and allow them to have access to a wide variety of resources.

Conceptually, the unitary assumption leads us away from investigating how more sparsely-knit, ramified networks may be useful in their own right, rather than be "failed" residues of unitary networks. We suspect that unitary networks will be useful for those who need to conserve and control their resources -- the network as "haven" (Lasch, 1977) -- while more ramified networks will be common among those structurally more entrepreneurial -- engaging in "networking" (Welch, 1980). You get more useful information about new jobs, for example, from more heterogeneous, less solidary ties, because they access different social worlds (cf. Granovetter, 1974; Boorman, 1975).

Ideologically, we often assume that unitary networks are the normative ideal. The linking of all with all in a solidary whole evokes nostalgia of pastoral, preindustrial villages. Yet recent systematic study strongly questions the unitariness of preindustrial communities. More to our contemporary point, we find that unitary networks are often not structurally congenial for contemporary Westerners. Many find them socially suffocating and usefully employ flexible links with multiple social circles. There may be a contradiction between behavior and perception here -- as the absence of a visible, palpable solidary community evokes uncertain social location and nostalgia for the preindustrial communal whole.

Large-Scale Impacts on Small-Scale Social Structures

Too much of the support system literature analyzes the network in isolation, as if it were the only relevant social phenomenon. Although one must draw analytic boundaries somewhere, we must realize that social networks are systems which transport resources to and from individuals, and the nature of these resources is largely determined by the structure of large-scale social systems.

For example, our spatial and social division of labor is very much a product of the Industrial Revolution. It constrains network formation and maintenance so that our kinfolk, coworkers, neighbors and friends are often different people in different network clusters. It is not an immutable phenomenon and may well be less common in the future, with micro-computer based decentralization and limited auto-mobility. Having a sense of this, a network therapist might suggest a change of employment to a person in need of a solidary network instead of engaging in structurally-unsustainable "retribalization" (cf. Speck and Attneave, 1973).

Another way of thinking about large-scale impacts is to consider what "support" does today. There has been a corporate takeover of much of the social reproduction business -- food, clothing, housing, education and emotions -- and support systems spend much time dealing with this. Much social support is not in the form of brokerage or mediation with large bureaucracies rather than the provision of direct material help. Instead of actually feeding or healing people, we tell them how to shop or connect them with a Parents Without Partners group.

This McDonaldization of life has important implications. People may need "brokers" more than "supporters". The quantity of ties may matter

less than the structure of ties. Ramified network structures, for example, may provide connections that can deal with diverse bureaucratic pressures. The analytic connection between supportive ties and political movements becomes clearer: we have found that recent Black American rioters are socially more rooted in their neighborhoods and jobs than are the non-rioters; and anomic, social disorganization theories of rioting have been disproven (cf. Feagin and Hahn, 1973).

Final Thoughts

I have emphasized needed conceptual developments in this paper. Yet support system research would also profit from going beyond its current basic methods to utilize some of the recent technical developments of network analysis (see the summaries in Bent, 1980; Sonquist, 1980). Although mathematically-based, these methods are not forbidding, and they enable researchers and therapists to take into account the complexities of ties and networks which I have been discussing today. Blockmodelling, for example, is intellectually devoted to teasing out role structures in networks (cf. White, Boorman and Breiger, 1976; Levine and Mullins, 1978). It provides powerful leverage in understanding the configurations of roles in a social system. Its use might enable community psychologists to better understand the types of social structures which facilitate the provision of interpersonal support.

I am not suggesting that psychologists be sociologists. Yet one task of community psychologists is to consider the impact of social structure on individual functioning. The use of social network concepts by support system research has been an important development during the past 20 years. Yet during that time, social network analysis has not stood still in its

study of social structure. My message here is that support system work should seize on recent network analytic developments for its next leap forward.

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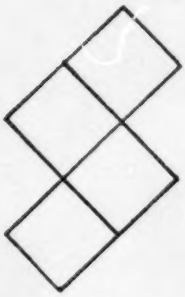

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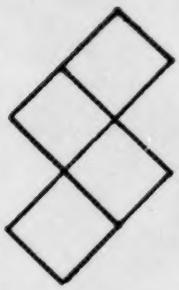

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